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ABSTRACT

A discussion of interpersonal communication examines how uncertainty is used in interaction, develops the concept of ambivalence, and considers the implications for cross-cultural interaction. Two types of ambivalence are distinguished: strategic and genuine. It is shown that ambivalence may be realized not only at the utterance level but also at the level of discourse. It is proposed that while the uncertainty the speaker creates through ambivalence can be a useful strategy to achieve a particular purpose, it may prevent the addressee from understanding the speaker's intent clearly and may be a major cause of misunderstanding, especially in interaction between people with different norms or conventions for the use of ambivalence. Some attention is given to discourse between native speakers of different languages. Contains 26 references. (MSE)

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THE PRAGMATICS OF UNCERTAINTY

Noriko Tanaka

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THE PRAGMATICS OF UNCERTAINTY

Noriko Tanaka

At the earlier stage of the Speech Act Approach, it was not seriously considered that it may not be possible to determine the illocutionary force of any particular speech act. Later, however, the indeterminacy of force has been more carefully studied by some linguists.

This paper focusses on one of such linguists, Thomas, and introduces her concept *ambivalence* (Thomas, 1986b). Then, I will develop this concept and argue that there are different types of *ambivalence*: *ambivalence-strategic* and *ambivalence-genuine*. I will further point out that *ambivalence* may be realised not only at the utterance level but also at the discourse level.

Finally, I will argue that the realisation and the interpretation of *ambivalence* may differ from one culture to another, which may cause communication breakdown.

The Indeterminacy of Illocutionary Force

At the earlier stage of the speech act approach. When Austin first introduced his speech act approach, he basically presupposes that a single force is encoded in each utterance: 'illocutionary act which has a certain force in saying something' (Austin, 1980, p. 121 [1962][1]). As Thomas (1986a, p. 151) points out, 'he initially presented it as if a single force could be unproblematically assigned to any utterance'. Or at least he left out of consideration that an utterance may perform a more complex illocutionary act which has multiple or unidentifiable forces in it.

Searle (1969) further refined Austin's model and narrowed the scope. Later, Searle (1975) directed his attention to the fact that human beings often say one thing when they mean something different, and explored this issue in terms of *indirect speech acts*:

> In hints, insinuations, irony, and metaphor--to mention a few examples--the speaker's utterance meaning and the sentence meaning come apart in various ways. One important class of such cases is that **in which the speaker utters a sentence, means what he says, but also means something more**.
>
> (Searle, 1975, p. 59, my emphasis)

However, his approach to *indirect speech acts* is rather rigid and has 'the pigeon-holing tendency' (Leech, 1980, p. 87). His main concern here was to know 'how it is possible for the speaker to say one thing and mean that but also to mean something else' (Searle, 1975, p. 60). His argument presupposed that a speech act is determinable by some idiomatic convention (ibid., p. 76) and by inference. In other words, he did not take it into

consideration that it may not be possible to determine the illocutionary force of any particular speech act.

A little before Searle (1975), Gordon and Lakoff (1975) [1971] also directed their interest to the fact that 'in everyday speech, we very often use one sentence to convey the meaning of another' (ibid., p. 83) and proposed 'conversational postulates' to explain how 'the meaning of another' is conveyed. They pointed out that an utterance could convey two different meanings:

> What is especially interesting about it is that the ambiguity of (30)[*Why are you painting your house purple?*] can convey two very different meanings, is not due to its having two different logical structures. Rather, the ambiguity is one of conveyed meaning, depending on context. In one class of contexts, the normal meaning of the question is conveyed. In another class of contexts, given certain conversational postulates, a very different meaning can be conveyed.
>
> (Gordon and Lakoff, 1975, p. 96)

However, like Searle (1975), they also presupposed that the 'meaning' is determinable according to the context; that is, a sentence can be grammatically ambiguous (see Thomas, 1986a, p. 152), but the context makes the meaning of the utterance clear. To them, (30) above is EITHER a question OR something else. About a different example, they argue:

> (52) I want to know where Harry went.
>
> Sentence (52) **either** can be taken literally as a statement of a desire for knowledge **or**, in contexts in which it is not taken literally, can convey a request by the speaker that the hearer tell him where Harry went.
>
> (Gordon and Lakoff, 1975, p. 100, my emphasis)

As Leech (1980) notes, neither Searle (1975) nor Gordon and Lakoff (1975) consider that the illocutionary force of an utterance can be indeterminable even in context, and the speaker may deliberately want it so:

> (19) Will you take out the garbage?
>
> is ambiguous. For Searle, (19) would be a request expressed by way of a question; for Gordon and Lakoff, it is either the one thing or the other. I find this consequence of their approach untenable, in that it conflicts with what I have already said about **the strategic indeterminacy** of such illocutions.
>
> (Leech, 1980, p. 87-88, my emphasis)

These earlier models ignored the fact that 'if one looks even cursorily at a transcribed record of a conversation, it becomes immediately clear that we do not know how to assign speech acts to the utterances in a non-arbitrary way' (Levinson, 1980, p. 20). In a different article, Levinson (1981) points out several inadequacies of speech act models. He throws doubts on:

(1) The existence and identifiability of unit acts corresponding to specific utterance units.
(2) The existence and identifiability of utterance units corresponding to unit acts.
(3) The existence of a specifiable function or procedure that will assign utterance units to unit acts (speech acts).
(4) The assumption that sequences of utterances are regulated by conventional sequencing rules stated over speech act types.

(Levinson, 1981)

Leech (1980) also points out the speech-act indeterminacy:

First, it seems to me that the yes-or-no conditions imposed by Searlesque speech-act typology do not justly represent the shifting, continuously variable nature of pragmatic illocutionary force. Is it, for example, always possible to decide whether we're dealing with a request (where S has no authority over H) and a command (where he does)? Where does one draw the line between:

(7) Sit down.
(8) Will you sit down!
(9) Please sit down.
(10) Why don't you sit down?
(11) Would you kindly sit down? etc.

Clearly no line can be drawn, because authority (whether regarded as social or psychological) is a relative rather than absolute matter.

(Leech, 1980, p. 84-85)

The development of the theory. The criticism of the earlier speech act model was the germ of a more flexible and dynamic view of communication. In the 1980s, linguists sought a more dynamic system of utterance description, rather than revising the original speech act model. Thomas (1986b) argues:

What is needed is not a rigid framework which leads inevitably to a Procrustean distortion of the data, but rather a dynamic system of utterance interpretation which takes account of speaker goals and assigns to utterance not **a** meaning but meaning **potential**. It might not be tidy, but it would reflect more accurately the way people "make meaning" in interaction.

(Thomas, 1986b, p. 38)

The dynamic view of interaction has enabled linguists to re-consider various aspects of communication; what was regarded as 'given' or 'discrete' is now viewed more flexibly. Candlin and Lucas (1984) argue:

(...) acts are best placed on continua rather than seen as discrete and unproblematically identifiable phenomena.

(Candlin and Lucas, 1984, p. 43)

With the dynamic view of interaction, the aspect which was regarded as 'untidy' or 'problematic' to the speech act model is now considered more positively. Leech (1980) not only points out the indeterminacy of a speech act, but also recognizes the strategic value of it: 'Surely an essential point about such indirect utterances is that they are not **meant** to be determinate' (Leech, 1980, p. 85). He points out that the speaker may intentionally keep the act indeterminate:

> In fact, the rhetoric of speech acts often encourages ambivalence:
>
> (40) Would you like to come in and sit down?
>
> Depending on the situation, (40) could be an invitation, a request, or a directive. Or, more important, it could be deliberately poised on the certain boundary between all three. **It is often in the speaker's interest**, and in the interests of politeness, to allow the precise force of a speech act to remain unclear.
>
> (Leech, 1980 p. 26, my emphasis)

Brown and Levinson (1987) [1978] also refer to the same strategic value of keeping the meaning open to negotiation:

> (...) if an actor goes off record in doing A, then there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself to one particular intent. (...) Linguistic realizations of off-record strategies include metaphor and irony, rhetorical questions, understatement, tautologies, **without doing so directly, so that the meaning is to some degree negotiable.**
>
> (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 69, my emphasis)

Leech (1983) also points out the negotiability of pragmatic factors, referring to an utterance made 'by an American hostage in Iran in 1980, when he was due for early release' (ibid., p. 23):

> *Considering that I am a hostage, I should say that I have been treated fairly.*
> (...) This may be an extreme case, but **it manifests an ambivalence and multiplicity of function** that is far from unusual as an exemplar of what language can do. The indeterminacy of conversational utterance also shows itself in the NEGOTIABILITY of pragmatic factors; that is, by leaving force unclear, S may leave H the opportunity to choose between one force and another, and thus leaves part of the responsibility of the meaning to H.
>
> (Leech, 1983, p. 23-24, my emphasis)

The dynamic view of interaction has made it possible to re-consider various linguistic models and to present more flexible and realistic views of discourse. From this flexible point of view, deviation from a 'rule' may itself have its communicative value.

Ambivalence

Different types of ambivalence. Thomas (1986b) develops Leech's concept of *ambivalence* and defines it as:

> *Ambivalence* in which the speaker does not make clear precisely which of a series of related illocutionary acts is intended
>
> (Thomas, 1986b, p. 9)

Although ambivalence is quite common in our daily interaction, why the speaker uses it and what s/he expects from the addressee may vary from one case to another. In order to understand clearly why we employ ambivalence, we need to explore different cases of ambivalence and to consider what factors make them different.

To examine the cases, I would like to follow Thomas (1992), who differentiates the different levels of intent in performing a speech act. I define each intent as follows:

Interpersonal intent: how S wants A to consider S's speech act.
or as what speech act S wants A to regard her/his utterance.
Perlocutionary intent[2]: what S wants A to accomplish by performing the speech act, or what perlocutionary effect S wants to have on A.

According to these concepts, *ambivalence* is understood as the case in which *interpersonal intent* is negotiable; S leaves unspecified what speech act s/he is performing, and leaves it to A how to take it. In the example we discussed in The development of the theory (Leech, 1980, p. 26), when S says 'Would you like to come in and sit down?', S presents her/his *interpersonal intent* in a indeterminable manner; in this case it does not matter very much what speech act A considers S's utterance as long as it is considered reasonably 'polite' in the situation.

On the other hand, in terms of *perlocutionary intent*, the cases vary. First of all, I would like to point out that perlocutionary intent may or may not be clear in S's mind. When it is clear, ambivalence is employed basically for some strategic reason; in order to achieve a certain perlocutionary intent, ambivalence is advantageous to S. When it is not clear, ambivalence may be rather the reflection of unclearness in S's mind. I will call each case:

Ambivalence-strategic: S has a certain perlocutionary intent in mind, and uses ambivalence strategically.
Ambivalence-genuine: Perlocutionary intent is not clear in S's mind, and the unclearness is reflected as ambivalence.

I would like to discuss some cases in each category, and to show a diversity of 'clearness' and 'negotiability' of perlocutionary intent in ambivalence.

Ambivalence-strategic. Ambivalence-strategic is further divided into two cases:

While interpersonal intent is negotiable,
(1) perlocutionary intent is clear in S's mind and not negotiable.
(2) perlocutionary intent is clear in S's mind but negotiable.

In the first case, regardless of A's reaction, S wants to achieve a certain perlocutionary effect on A, which is not negotiable; in other words, the motivation for ambivalence here is simply to present the intent in a less threatening manner, and S does not have the intention to give the option to A or to change her/his original intention.

In the second case, although S has a certain perlocutionary intent, S is ready to negotiate it according to A's reaction; the motivation for ambivalence here may be to probe the risk, and if the risk is high, to change the original intent to a less risky one, or if necessary, to abort it. Ambivalence may enable S to keep the original intent from A and to avoid the responsibility for it.

Perlocutionary intent is clear in S's mind, and not negotiable. For example, if I visit my supervisor's office for our regular meeting (to discuss my work for about one hour) and if she says to me:

(1) 'Would you like to sit down?'

I normally do not have the choice of saying 'No, thank you'; because of our relationship (supervisor and student) and because of the situation (our regular meeting), I am supposed to understand that she wants me to sit down and has authority to say so. In this sense, despite the 'offer-like' form, the actual meaning of the utterance is more like a 'command'. In other words, S's perlocutionary intent (what S wants A to do) is clear and not negotiable.

Yet, the 'meaning' of the utterance is not exactly the same as a 'command'; if S only wanted to convey the meaning of 'command', she would choose a clear form of command, such as 'Sit down'. The less command-like form conveys another intent of S: interpersonal intent (as what speech act S wants A to regard her/his utterance). S's choice of ambivalence shows that she wants A to regard her utterance not as a sharp-cut 'command' but as something between 'offer' and 'command'.

The motivation for ambivalence here is basically 'politeness'; S wants to present her perlocutionary intent in a less threatening manner. However, it does not mean that the perlocutionary intent is negotiable; she does not give me the option about my following action. In this case, it is clear to both parties.

S's intents at different levels may not always be understood by A. Take the following example, which is the conversation between my landlady (X) and me (Y). When I came into the kitchen, she told me that someone had phoned me, and gave me the telephone number of the caller. I went to the telephone in the kitchen, and picked up the receiver, then she said:

(2) X_1: *You can use the telephone in my room, if you like.* [there is the other phone in X's room]
Y_1: Oh, yes. Thank you. [still holding the receiver of the phone in the kitchen, looking at the memo of the telephone number]
X_2: [cooking] You can use the telephone in my room because I might be a bit noisy.
Y_2: I see. [hangs the receiver up, and goes to the other phone in X's room]

The form 'you can...' here is ambivalent; as Leech (1983) points out, the form allows various interpretations:

> (...) the statement beginning *You can* is an appropriate means of softening the effect of an impositive. It can best be regarded as a tentative version of *You must:* **by pointing out the ability of H to do the task, S in effect (by the Hinting Strategy) proposes that H do it.** It mitigates the force of *You will...* because as we have seen (...), ***You can...* carries the implicature 'You do not have to', and so offers H, on the face of it, a pretext for ignoring the hint.** Since it is formulated as a proposition rather than as a question, however, [51] [You can take me home] **does not overtly offer H the choice of saying 'No'**, and is in this respect less tactful than the corresponding question. **Its politeness derives, in contrast, from its ambivalence: its sense allows it just as easily to be a recommendation or a piece of advice (an illocution for the benefit of H) as to be an impositive.**
>
> (Leech, 1983, p. 122, my emphasis)

In the example (2) above, because of the form 'You can...', Y interprets X_1 as a piece of 'advice' or rather as an 'offer', thinking that X considers Y's privacy; it would be better to have a telephone conversation with nobody around. As Y is not concerned about privacy and also thinks it rather impolite to accept the 'offer' (which could mean that Y does not want X to hear the conversation), Y simply responds 'Thank you' to the 'considerate offer' and continues to use the phone in the kitchen (Y_1).

However, X's following utterance (X_2) makes Y realise that X_1 was actually not an 'offer', but more close to a 'request'. Although X uses the same form 'You can...', the fact that she says it twice makes a *cumulative effect* (Leech and Thomas, 1990, p. 198); the repetition makes her actual *perlocutionary intent* (what she wants Y to do) clearer and it also enables Y to 'assign value to an utterance in the light of what has gone before' (ibid., pp. 198-199). Y re-assess X's previous utterance, accepts it as a 'request', and complies with her perlocutionary intent (goes to the other phone)[3].

In this case, although the speaker has the interpersonal intent to present her utterance in a less imposing manner, the perlocutionary intent is not actually negotiable, which is not understood by the addressee; the negotiability of the interpersonal intent disguises the perlocutionary intent. The possibility of being misunderstood is a disadvantage of ambivalence, and the probability may be higher in cross-cultural interaction; native speakers may be less likely to misunderstand the speaker's perlocutionary intent in the example above

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(this point will be discussed in further detail in Mismatch 1: ambivalence → strategic simple speech act).

Perlocutionary intent is clear in S's mind, but negotiable. As example 2 shows, when perlocutionary intent is not negotiable, S has to reveal it if it is not understood by A. When it is negotiable, however, S may not reveal it even if the original perlocutionary intent is not achieved. Suppose the landlady (X) (in example 2) would prefer me (Y) to use the other phone, but does not really mind; in other words, the perlocutionary intent is clear in her mind, but it is negotiable. In this case, she may not reveal her original intent, even if I do not understand it:

(2)' X: You can use the telephone in my room, if you like.
Y: Oh, yes. Thank you. [still using the phone in the kitchen]

Especially when the original perlocutionary intent is risky, ambivalence is advantageous to the speaker. With ambivalence, the speaker may show the negotiability of her/his perlocutionary intent, and give high optionality to the addressee. This enables the speaker to take the result as *agreement* and to avoid the responsibility for it.

Weiser (1974) gives an example of a 'socially tricky situation':

> A runs into an acquaintance, B, who is a member of a committee making an investigation that is supposed to be closed to the public until it reaches a final conclusion. A knows that it would be unethical for B to talk about what went on in that day's hearing. But A **doesn't** know -- this is the crucial uncertainty -- how willing B is to stretch his ethics on occasion. To ask straight out (What went on?") would show that A entertains the possibility that B might be dishonest, which could be insulting if B is not. But if A says nothing, he loses the chance to find out what went on in the hearing in case B **was** willing to talk. So A says -- at the appropriate time, in the appropriate tone of voice -- "I'm curious about what went on at the hearing."
>
> (Weiser, 1974, p. 724)

In this case, A actually wants B to talk about the hearing; in this sense, the perlocutionary intent is clear in his mind. Yet, he does not want to achieve it at the risk of damaging the relationship with B; the perlocutionary intent is negotiable. Ambivalence enables A to show the negotiability and to give the option to B, as Weiser points out:

> If B is willing to talk, he can treat this as a request for information.
> If B is going to stick by his ethics, all he has to do is say, "Yes, I guess a lot of people are. The reporters would love to get their hands on a transcript." and it becomes clear that A has not made a request, but a simple statement about his state of mind.
>
> (Weiser, 1974, p. 724)

In Weiser's example above, if B is willing to accept A's 'request', A will be able to achieve his original perlocutionary intent. Even if not, however, A does not have to admit

that he failed to achieve it; he may continue the conversation quite naturally, pretending that he never had such intent. Although B may suspect the intent, he will never be able to prove it; A may avoid the responsibility and save face.

In fact, in many daily interactions, it often remains unknown to the other person what perlocutionary intent S actually had in mind. In some cases, S may even achieve a certain perlocutionary effect, keeping it unknown whether s/he actually has the intent or not. Let me take an example. For Christmas, I (X) and my housemate (Y) gave some pretty animal-shaped candles to our landlady (Z). Z was pleased and said:

(3) 'Oh, W will be very envious!'

W is our cleaning lady who is supposed to come to clean the house the next day. Because she likes animals very much, she must love such animal-shaped candles and will be envious of them if she finds them under the Christmas tree; in that sense, Z's utterance above is just natural as a 'comment' on the present.

On the other hand, the utterance had a different perlocutionary effect on X and Y; it reminded them of another person (W) to whom they should not forget to give a present. They will never know if Z had such a perlocutionary intent (reminding) in mind because it was beautifully unclear and will remain unknown.

The ambivalence is advantageous to Z. Suppose Z had the intent (to remind X and Y to give a present to W); as a landlady, it would be preferable if her tenants give a little present to her cleaning lady and keep on good terms with her. However, her *sociopragmatic judgments* (Thomas, 1983, p. 104) may tell her that she has neither the right nor the obligation to tell her tenants to whom they should give a Christmas present; if she were their mother, she might. Therefore, if Z performed the speech act of 'reminding' clearly (e.g. 'Don't forget to give a present to W'), it would be considered 'imposing' by X/Y and interpersonally risky; the relationship between X/Y and Z might be affected negatively.

Ambivalence resolves the conflict; her perlocutionary intent (to remind X/Y) will never be known, but the perlocutionary effect (X/Y were reminded) was certainly produced. In fact, I still do not know if she actually had the intent or not. This example shows us that perlocutionary effect can be created whether the corresponding intent is present or not.

Ambivalence-genuine. In some cases, the perlocutionary intent itself is not clear even in S's mind. Although it may sound odd that S says something without knowing why s/he says it, I do think it may happen, and this is supported by examples below. In this case, ambivalence is not a strategy to mitigate or disguise a certain perlocutionary intent, but rather a reflection of the genuine unclarity in S's mind, which I call *ambivalence-genuine*.

Yet, I do not mean that ambivalence-genuine is always clearly differentiated from ambivalence-strategic; there may be gradation between them. How much S is clear about a certain perlocutionary intent in mind and how much s/he is aware of the strategic aspect of ambivalence may be a matter of degree. As Weiser (1974) states:

> But when I say that we use them, I do not mean that we plan them with complete conscious awareness. (...) the strategies I have been discussing are comparable in terms of level of awareness to many of the strategies of human interaction discussed in the works of Erving Goffman.
>
> (Weiser, 1974, p. 728)

With the level of awareness in mind, I would like to focus on relatively typical cases of ambivalence-genuine and to discuss how it works below.

Let me take an example from Thomas (1992): X (herself) and Y (her colleague) went for a walk with some students. Taking a rest, X offered Y a muesli bar, and Y responded:

(4) X: Do you want a Tracker?
Y: **I've got a banana.** (Thomas, 1992, my emphasis)

Y's utterance can be interpreted either a 'decline' to X's offer or a 'counter-offer' to X's offer, which implies that Y accepts X's offer. Thomas (X) told me in personal communication that she had not understood what Y meant and had asked him which speech act he had meant, and that Y had answered he himself had not known it clearly.

I do not think this example is exceptional. In daily interactions, we often come across the situation in which we do not know what we really want to do; we may not mind either, or we may not know clearly which option is interpersonally or perlocutionary beneficial or costly. In this kind of situation, we may simply keep our utterance open to multiple interpretations, let the other person choose one, and accept the result.

The following interaction is another example. X (a British student) and Y (myself) share a kitchen, preparing dinner:

(5) X_1: What's that? [looking at the seaweed which Y is washing]
Y_1: This is seaweed. *Would you like to try?*
X_2: *Just eat it as it is?*
Y_2: You can make it into salad, with lettuce, for example.

Y has a conflict. She thinks it better for her to make an offer; as X shows some interest in the seaweed (X_1), it may be unfriendly not to make an offer. On the other hand, she hesitates to make an offer; she is not sure if X wants to eat the seaweed, and if not, her offer would force X to eat it, which he actually does not want to do.

In fact, she does not mind at all whether X eats the seaweed or not; in other words, she does not care what perlocutionary effect her utterance makes on X. As a solution, Y uses ambivalence, leaving her interpersonal intent negotiable; Y can be interpreted as an 'offer' and also as a simple 'question'. She also keeps her perlocutionary intent negotiable; X may react either to an 'offer' or to a 'question'.

However, X's reaction is not clear, either; by saying 'Just eat it as it is?'(X_2), X may show his 'interest' in eating the seaweed or his 'reluctance' to do it. It is also ambivalent;

X can be interpreted as an 'acceptance' or 'decline' to Y's 'offer', or it can also be interpreted as a simple 'question'. X may not be clear about his perlocutionary intent either; he may be neither keen nor very unwilling to eat it.

Not knowing whether X has a certain intent or not, Y decides to take X_2 as a 'question' and simply explains how to eat it, leaving other possible interpretations untouched. As a result, her 'offer' (as a possible interpretation) is left open-ended; it has been neither accepted nor declined.

In a light social conversation like this, the interlocutors often do not have strong perlocutionary intent; in the example above, whether X eats the seaweed or not does not really matter to Y (and probably to X, either). What matters more is the interpersonal aspect in the interaction; to show some friendliness or consideration to each other. In this sense, to perform a speech act (e.g. make an offer to show friendliness) itself is more important than the perlocutionary effect which the speech act may produce (e.g. the offer is accepted and X eats the seaweed). If the effect is interpersonally risky (e.g. the offer may be refused, or unwillingly accepted), they would rather not make any; ambivalence is a way to avoid the risk.

Ambivalence at a different level: discoursal ambivalence. I would like to point out that *ambivalence* may be realised not only at the utterance level but also at the discourse level. When S makes an utterance, s/he may have a certain intent at the discourse level, which I call *discoursal intent* and define as:

> Discoursal intent: what discoursal development S wants to create by the present utterance.

In *discoursal ambivalence*, S's discoursal intent is presented in a negotiable manner. Let me take an example. One of my friends bought a car and gave me a lift to the University. Next week, when we were talking on the phone, she told me that she would go to the University the next day, and I said:

(6) 'Oh, I'm also going to the University tomorrow.'

First, at the utterance level, this utterance is ambivalent. My friend may simply take my utterance as a piece of information, and say something like 'Do you have a class?' If I am more fortunate, however, she may even take it as a 'request' for a lift and directly respond, such as 'OK. What time suits you?'

Second, at the discourse level, there are also two possibilities; the utterance may work as a 'pre-request' ('I'm also going to the University tomorrow, so could you give me a lift ?') and also as a 'pre-suggestion' of meeting together somewhere at the University ('I'm also going to the University tomorrow, so why don't we meet somewhere at the University and chat?'), which we sometimes do. Therefore, in this case, at least two 'discoursal intents' ('pre-request' and 'pre-suggestion') are presented in a negotiable manner.

The possible functions and responses are shown as follows:

'I'm also going to the University tomorrow'

DIFFERENT LEVELS	POSSIBLE FUNCTIONS		POSSIBLE RESPONSES
Utterance:	giving information	⇐	'Do you have a class?'
	request for a lift	⇐	'OK. What time suits you?
Discourse:	pre-request	⇐	'Shall I give you a lift?'
	pre-suggestion	⇐	'Shall we meet and have a chat?'

Discoursal ambivalence can be also used as a strategy. It is a common practice in our daily interaction that S deliberately presents her/his *discoursal intent* unclearly with other interpretations possible to A, and leave it to A how to develop the following discourse.

Problems Related to Ambivalence

I would like to point out that there may be some cultural differences in whether a certain utterance is understood as *ambivalence* or not, which could be a factor in communication problems in cross-cultural interaction. To consider this point, the concept of different kinds of ambivalence, which I have discussed, is useful, because the differentiation makes it clearer how the discrepancy between the speaker's expectation and the addressee's understanding may occur. I will show some examples in cross-cultural communication.

Mismatch 1: ambivalence → strategic simple speech act. First, I will focus on ambivalence-strategic, in which the speaker has a clear perlocutionary intent in mind. When both parties share the same convention of when and how ambivalence-strategic is used, the perlocutionary intent in the speaker's mind is often clear to the other person. Yet, this may not be expected in cross-cultural interaction. Without the same norms or conventions, the other person may take ambivalence-strategic as a simple direct speech act. Let us go back to the example 2 which I discussed in Perlocutionary intent is clear in S's mind, and not negotiable.

When my landlady said to me:

(2) 'You can use the telephone in my room, if you like.'

From the linguistic form 'You can..., if you like', I first took her utterance as a simple 'offer'. However, the following discourse revealed that her actual intention was more like a 'request'; she wanted me to use the telephone in her room, not the one in the kitchen. In other words, her perlocutionary intent was clear in her mind, but she employed *ambivalence* to encode negotiability at the interpersonal level in order to present the perlocutionary intent in a less imposing manner. I failed to notice the negotiability she offered, not to mention at what level it was offered.

I suppose that native speakers may not fail to understand her intention; in fact, some of my British friends pointed out that native speakers probably would not misunderstand her intention as I did. It should be also pointed out that the conversation above occurred soon after I went to Britain, and that if I were in the same situation now I would understand her intention better.

Staying in Britain longer, I have realised that there are some linguistic conventions which the speaker employs to make her/his utterance 'ambivalent'; some expressions, such as 'You can...if you like' 'Don't bother to...' or 'Would you like to...?', are often used when the speaker actually has a certain perlocutionary intent but wants to 'imply' it in a less imposing manner. As the example above shows, 'You can...if you like' is often used when the speaker actually wants the other person to do it. In the same way, 'Would you like to do the dishes?', 'Don't bother to lock the door', 'I don't mind having another cup' and 'I won't keep you any longer' often mean 'I want you to (help me) do the dishes', 'Keep the door open', 'I want to have another cup' and 'I want you to leave now' respectively.

Although these expressions are not so conventionalized as some more formulaic expressions such as 'Can you pass me the salt?', they are still regarded as conventionalized in the usage. Learners of English should be made aware of this kind of usage, which in my view is not sufficiently taught in the teaching situation. In fact, I did not know what the other person actually meant by these expressions before I learned from the experience staying abroad. 'Metapragmatic awareness' (Thomas, 1983, p. 91) should also be raised in this respect.

Mismatch 2: simple speech act ambivalence → strategic. The reverse of the above may also occur; the speaker's intention of a simple speech act may be misunderstood as ambivalence-strategic. Their communication norm, 'infer the other person's wish before s/he says it', may encourage the Japanese to do so. One of my British friends, who is staying in Japan, gave me an example. When she wanted to travel to a certain area in Japan, she asked one of her Japanese friends, who lives in that area:

(7) 'Do you know any good hotels?'

Although she simply intended a request for the information, she found later that the friend had made a reservation at a hotel for her; her simple question was misunderstood as ambivalence-strategic to convey her request for a reservation implicitly. This kind of unwelcomed 'kindness' seems to be quite a common experience to foreign people staying in Japan.

Sakamoto and Naotsuka (1982) also point out that a simple question, such as 'Do you know how I can get a kabuki ticket?', 'Is there any salt anywhere?' (at a cafeteria), or 'Has anyone seen my pen?', would 'result in a widespread flurry of activity that I had no intention of causing' (ibid., pp. 66-7). Although it should be noted that the reaction would not be the same if the question were asked by a Japanese (people may try to be particularly 'kind' to foreign people, thinking that 'foreigners' are powerless and need more help), it is still true that the mismatch may be caused by the difference of their norms in communication.

Mismatch 3: simple speech act → understood but different action. A mismatch may also occur even when the addressee understands the speaker's intent correctly. It may occur not at the understanding level but at the action level. In the example discussed above, being asked 'Do you know any good hotels?', the addressee may rightly understand that the speaker intends a simple request for information, but she may still think it will be more considerate or kind to reserve a room for her friend, following the politeness norm in her own culture.

When the other person shares the same norm, the unexpected action may be welcomed as something more than expected. Unfortunately, however, it may not be always welcomed and even considered impolite or patronizing, which is likely to happen in cross-cultural interaction. For non-native speakers, it is often difficult to know what action they should take.

Some knowledge we have about the other person's culture may confuse us even more. Hearing foreign people complain about 'imposed kindness' by Japanese, I tend to hesitate to do things for my foreign friends which I would probably do for my Japanese friends. For example, when one of my American friends showed interest in the toothbrush-cover I had bought from my dentist (i.e., cheap but not available at shops), according to my knowledge about English-speaking culture (make an offer explicitly and give the choice to the other person) I(X) asked her(Y):

(8) X: Would you like me to buy one for you?
Y: Well, I'm just interested.

If she had been a Japanese, I would have probably bought it for her in spite of her reply; it does not cost much anyway and I know that a Japanese would usually appreciate my 'favour' even if s/he did not intend to ask it. Although the American may also appreciate it, the possibility of a different reaction prevented me from doing it.

I know that the norm may be different, but the problem is that I do not know when it is different. In some situations, it is easy for me to anticipate the difference; for example, I know that English speaking people's 'No, thank you' to an offer such as 'Would you like some more?' at a dinner table is usually taken at face value, whereas a Japanese refusal (especially the first one) should not be taken as such but as a reflection of their social norm, 'Be reserved'.

However, it is not always the case. English speaking people also sometimes do more than what they understand the other person meant. For example, even when the other person says 'Just bring yourself' to an offer, 'Shall I bring something?' (to a party), they often bring something, not because they understand the other person wants us to bring something, but because they simply follow their social convention. Without sharing the social convention, I often do not know what to do; it will be embarrassing if everyone except me brings something, and also embarrassing if I am the only person to have brought something.

Mismatch 4: ambivalence → genuine simple speech act. Problems may also occur when the speaker intends *ambivalence-genuine*, in which the perlocutionary intent is not clear in the speaker's mind and the genuine negotiability is offered to the addressee. Although the

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perlocutionary intent is negotiable here, this does not mean the speaker will always welcome any move by the addressee. Conflict may occur when the addressee fails to see the basic message 'let's negotiate'.

When and how much we expect to negotiate our intent may differ from one culture to another. If the addressee has a different expectation about it, s/he may fail to understand the speaker's message of 'let's negotiate'; the speaker's intention of *ambivalence-genuine* may be taken as a simple speech act which does not need negotiation. To understand the speaker's intent correctly may be particularly difficult when the ambivalence covers not only the utterance level but also the discourse level.

Let me take an example from my own experience. My Canadian friend (X), who was staying in Japan, and I(Y) went out for dinner several times. Deciding where we should go, our conversation was carried out as follows:

(9) X_1: What would you like to eat?
Y_1: *How about you?*
X_2: I don't mind going to the same restaurant we went to last week.
Y_2: OK. Let's go there then.

My perlocutionary intent was genuinely negotiable in the sense that I honestly had no particular preference about the dinner. However, I(Y) actually felt that X expressed his own wish too soon (X_2) and too clearly in spite of the fact that he first asked me about my wish (X_1) and also used a less direct expression 'I don't mind...'(X_2). Having this kind of conversation several times, I complained, saying 'YOU always decide'. X was a bit offended, and said 'It was YOU who gave me the option', referring to my utterance 'How about you?'(Y_1). Although I knew that X's argument was completely right, I was still dissatisfied with the way the conversation had been carried on.

I wondered why, and realised that my dissatisfaction was probably caused by the discrepancy between X and me in the beliefs of when and how much negotiation we may expect from the other person. In other words, we had different intentions towards our own utterance, and then had a different expectation from the other person's response. X simply intended a 'question' by 'What would you like to eat?'(X_1), and understood my response 'How about you?' as the answer to his question; i.e. I had no idea and gave the choice to him. On the other hand, I intended *discoursal ambivalence* by 'How about you?'; although my utterance was in the form of a question, I understood it myself as a 'negotiation opener' and expected X to negotiate the discoursal intent rather than simply to answer my 'question'.

My 'unreasonable' expectation may be defended by my cultural background[4]. According to Japanese social norms, we are expected not to express our own wish straightaway but to ask the other person's wish first; therefore, in the example above, being asked 'What would you like to eat?', my automatic reaction is 'How about you?' rather than to answer the question and express my own wish. Between Japanese who share this norm, both parties employ *discoursal ambivalence* and try to settle on a certain conclusion through probes and negotiations.

Kinoshita (1988) gives an example of how a guest is supposed to 'express' her/his wish to the hostess:

Hostess: Ofuro ga wakimashita. Oshokuji no yooi mo moo sugu dekimasu.
Dochira o saki ni nasaimasu ka.
(The bath is ready. The dinner is almost ready, too.
Which would you like first?)
Guest: Dochira demo gotsugoo no yoroshii hoo ni.
(Whichever is convenient for you.)
Hostess: Osuki na yoo ni.
(Whichever you like.)
Guest: Saa, doo shiyoo ka na.. ja, moshi osashitsukae nakattara saki ni ofuro o itadaki mashoo ka.
(Well, what shall I do.. then, if you don't mind, I may take a bath first.)
(Kinoshita, 1988, p. 19, English translation and emphasis are mine)

As this example shows, the guest is supposed not to take the hostess' utterance *Dochira o saki ni nasaimasu ka (Which would you like first?)* as a simple question, but to take it as a suggestion for negotiation. Even when the guest is sure that the hostess is ready to accept either choice of the guest, s/he is still supposed to negotiate before expressing her/his own wish. This is regarded as a more considerate and appropriate response. Although this example is an especially 'polite' case, this kind of negotiation is still fairly common in Japanese interaction.

Mismatch 5: ambivalence-genuine ⇒ ambivalence-strategic. In the previous section, I pointed out that a different cultural norm may prevent the addressee from understanding the speaker's intention of ambivalence; as a result, s/he may take it as a simple speech act. It should be further noted, however, even if the addressee rightly understands that the utterance is not a simple speech act but ambivalence, problems may still occur; for example, the speaker's intention of *ambivalence-genuine* may be taken as *ambivalence-strategic*, and her/his main purpose of negotiation may not be achieved.

This is also likely to occur in cross-cultural communication. The stereotype which we have about the other person's culture may be a cause. For example, if someone believes that Japanese are indirect, s/he may take any ambivalent utterance by a Japanese as *ambivalence-strategic* even when the speaker actually intends *ambivalence-genuine*; as a result, the message of 'Let's negotiate' is not taken.

The *indirect* communication pattern in Japanese is often pointed out by people from other cultures, and I agree that the indirect way of communication is often employed in Japanese. However, I suspect that what others regard as *indirectness* (or *ambivalence-strategic* in my terms) may not always be indirectness but may actually be *ambivalence-genuine*; that is, the speaker's main purpose is to negotiate the perlocutionary intent itself, rather than to convey her/his intent in an indirect manner. Examples are seen in Schmidt (1983) who claims that Japanese speakers of English often employ *indirectness*:

(...) **This extremely indirect way** of conveying directives which may imply criticism is, from all reports, typically Japanese.

13. this is all garbage (put it out")
14. ah, I have two shirts upstairs (please get them while you're there")
15. uh, you like this chair? (please move over")
16. you like this shirt? (why don't you change it?")

Examples 13 to 16 are all hints, specifying neither the task to be performed nor the agent who is to perform the action (...) There is an important difference, however, between hints 13 and 14, which imply the request message by mentioning a reason why an action might be desired, immediately comprehended as requests by the English native speaker address see, and hints 15 and 16 which were not understood as directitives by the hearer and apparently represent **transfer of a Japanese hinting pattern to English.**

(Schmidt, 1983, p. 153, my emphasis)

In my view, 15 and 16 above are ambivalence-genuine (or at least the ambivalence-strategic which we discussed in Perlocutionary intent is clear in S's mind, but negotiable) rather than indirectness or hints; that is, the speaker wants to negotiate the perlocutionary intent with the addressee, and is ready to change it according to the reaction. The main purpose of these utterances is not to convey directives in an indirect manner, but to probe the other person's reaction itself.

In a different article, Schmidt (1993) explains the situation in which his subject employs this kind of 'hints':

> In looking at the development of pragmatic ability by my subject, Wes, I found that **he often use hints that native speakers of English, including myself, did not realize were intended as directives.** For example, once in a theater, Wes turned to me and asked me if I liked my seat. I responded that my seat was fine, not realizing at all that he was indirectly requesting that we change places.
>
> (Schmidt, 1993, p. 30-31, my emphasis)

Schmidt (1993) first took Wes's utterance as a simple question and responded to it ('my seat is fine'). Later he realised that it was actually not a simple question, and re-considered it a 'hint' or ambivalence-strategic.

However, this example again, in my view, is ambivalence-genuine. Although Schmidt does not explain how he 'realised' Wes' actual intention as an 'indirect request', I would rather think that Wes' main intention is 'negotiation' itself; that is, he wanted to change the place only if the other person also wanted to. This is different from an indirect request. I discussed this example with some Japanese friends and they agreed with my point.

In Japanese conversation, it is often even more important to show consideration to each other, rather than to achieve a certain perlocutionary intent. According to this communication norm, the interaction between the two above would be carried on, for example:

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(10) A: Do you like your seat?
B: Well, my seat is fine, but how about yours? Aren't you comfortable?
A: Well, I'm OK.
B: Are you sure?
A: Yeah, sure. Don't worry.

Although the result is the same (they did not change the seats), the difference is that they have come to this settlement through negotiation, which is in my view an important aspect in Japanese interactions. Considering my own experience in communicating with English speaking people, I think that one of the major causes of dissatisfaction I have felt stemmed from the lack of this kind of negotiation, not by the settlement itself. Even when I think the matter itself is trivial, I sometimes feel 'neglected' as the other person does not respond to the main purpose of my utterance, that is, to exchange consideration. This suggests that problems in communication may occur not only when we misinterpret what the other person means by the utterance, but also when we fail to notice what s/he wants to do by making the utterance.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to examine how *uncertainty* is employed in interaction, to develop the concept of *ambivalence*, and to consider the implication for cross-cultural interaction. Although the uncertainty the speaker creates in ambivalence can be a useful strategy to achieve a particular purpose, it may prevent the addressee from understanding the speaker's intent properly. Especially when we interact with people who may have different norms or conventions in how to use ambivalence, it may be a major cause of misunderstanding.

However, it does not mean that I am pessimistic about people from different cultural backgrounds understanding each other. To me, cross-cultural interaction has been interesting and constructive, including the misunderstandings I sometimes suffer from. Cross-cultural communication may be difficult, but I believe that it is possible to avoid conflict or to improve tolerance if we are sufficiently aware of the possible causes of misunderstanding. I hope that the discussion above will make some contribution to raising the awareness.

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NOTES

[1] [ ] indicates the first publication.

[2]In 'perlocutionary effect', Austin (1980, p. 101) [1962] includes not only 'action' but also 'the feelings or thoughts' of the other person, saying: 'Saying something will often, or even normally, produce certain consequential effects up on the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons (...) We shall call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a 'perlocutionary' act (...)'. In this sense, 'how S wants A to consider the speech act' should be also categorised as 'perlocutionary intent'. However, highlighting the goal which is directed to the 'interpersonal' aspect, I categorise it as 'interpersonal intent' here.

[3]When I gave this paper at the 9th Annual International Conference on Pragmatics and Language Learning (1995), Bouton, L. F. commented on this point; that is, even when X says X_2, she may not clearly intend a request but still think about Y's benefit. Bouton also pointed out that even if so, she might have changed that position if Y had not taken her 'offer'. I completely agree that a speaker's intention is not always clear and s/he may change it according to the development of the discourse. I will discuss this point also in Ambivalence - genuine.

[4]As well as the cultural difference, the gender difference may also be a factor of this mismatch. Giving a similar example of the discrepancy between the speaker's expectation and the addressee's understanding, Tannen (1991) ascribes the mismatch to the gender difference in conversational style. She states:

> (...) The woman had asked, "Would you like to stop for a drink?" Her husband had answered, truthfully, "No," and they hadn't stopped. He was later frustrated to learn that his wife was annoyed because she had wanted to stop for a drink. He wondered, "Why didn't she just say what she wanted? Why did she play games with me?" The wife, I explained, was annoyed not because she had not gotten her way, but because her preference had not been considered. From her point of view, she had shown concern for her husband's wishes, but he had shown no concern for hers.
>
> (Tannen, 1991, p. 15)

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